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## ASSISI<sup>1</sup>

Di quella costa, là dov' ella frange  
Più sua rattezza, nacque al mondo un sole,  
Come fa questo talvolta di Gange.  
Però chi d'esso loco fa parole,  
Non dica Ascesi, chè direbbe corto,  
Ma Oriente, se proprio dir vuole.

*Paradiso*, XI, 49.

Upon that side  
Where it doth break its steepness most, arose  
A sun upon the world, as duly this  
From Ganges doth; therefore, let none who speak  
Of that place, say Ascesi; for its name  
Were lamely so delivered; but the East,  
To call things rightly, be it henceforth styled.

*Cary.*

So spoke Dante in the days of Assisi's greatest glory, when the movement started by St. Francis was at its flood and when the walls of the church of San Francesco were glowing with the new-wrought frescoes of Cimabue, Giotto and their associates.

Now the city has sunk into hopeless decay, and Poverty, which St. Francis chose for his bride, has made his birthplace her lasting home. And I fear that even the Saint would be tempted to renounce his spouse if he saw her in the garments that she wears

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<sup>1</sup>The literature devoted to Assisi, the most perfect shrine of early Renaissance painting and the home of St. Francis, the most popular of all the Saints, is of course enormous. It would form a library, and there has long been a demand for a compact volume, easily carried in the pocket, that should give the substance of the legends and present the history of Assisi's art more fully than in the brief pages of Baedeker. This work has now been admirably performed by Lina Duff Gordon in the volume on Assisi published by J. M. Dent & Co., of London, in their series of "Mediæval Towns." None but a specialist could desire more information than is found within the pages of this little book. It is an admirable guide, yet very entertaining; and happy is the traveller who with it in his hands can visit all the places of interest in the delightful old Umbrian town, and read upon the spot all that the authoress has to say; and even those to whom the opportunity of visiting Assisi is denied will find within the pages of the volume much to instruct and entertain, and will arise from its perusal with the fixed resolution one day to look from Assisi's mouldering battlements across to proud Perugia and to penetrate into its many shrines of legend and art.

to-day, so squalid, so hopeless, so unaspiring. Since the hour, nearly four hundred years ago, when she fell under the dominion of the Farnese Pope, Assisi, whose life had been so wild and turbulent, so filled with celestial visions and fiendish crimes, has slept on from age to age, growing ever more decrepit, weaker in mind and body. Now, however, the stream of visitors whom the modern facilities of travel bring to her gates, is infusing a little life into her palsied limbs; and she arouses herself sufficiently to stretch forth her hand to ask the stranger's alms. Since the day when the papal legate took up his residence in the castle perched high on the rock above her, no stone has been added to her structures, and from century to century they have mouldered into rest. Even the powerful castle that endured so many sieges has been permitted to fall into ruin, and if the inhabitants have kept their dwellings as a shelter, they have been content with placing, when needed, a little fresh mortar between the crumbling stones. If Dante should return he would note no difference save that which came over Rip VanWinkle during his long sleep. He would find the same steep and narrow streets, the same houses clinging like gigantic wasp-nests to the flanks of Mount Subasio, only it is all old and weather-stained and faded; and instead of the proud gallants, the stern warriors, the haughty dames, whom he had known of old, he would find a population whose spirit has been broken by ages of servitude, and which scarcely dreams of escaping from the poverty and squalor into which it has sunk.

The people of Assisi are inferior in energy and personal appearance to the surrounding population. This is always true of towns clustered about great monasteries. The fact is beyond dispute, but the explanations are various. The friends of monastic institutions say that the charity of the monks naturally attracts the halt, the lame and the blind, and that they and their descendants are necessarily feeble. The enemies of such establishments reply that the vices and bigotry of the monks have degraded a people that once was worthy of respect and admiration. The political economist is apt to suggest that the present condition of such towns proves that nothing is more unwise and, in the end, more unkind, than the indiscriminate giving of alms.

No doubt there is a portion of truth in all three explanations. The great monasteries have attracted numbers of the diseased and the deformed, who have lived on their bounty and propagated their sort in the vicinity. There have been vicious and bigoted monks who have corrupted and degraded the people entrusted to their charge. There have been saintly monks whose charity has outrun their practical wisdom; who have bestowed alms on the undeserving, and have unintentionally encouraged them in idleness and beggary. But whatever the cause, the fact remains, as the population of Assisi is here to attest.

But fortunately it is not to see the people that we are come. They are but the careless guardians of the treasures that the past has left them.

Italy has many towns like this, whose aspect has hardly changed since the days of the Renaissance, save that the pomp and splendor in which they then rejoiced have been replaced by wretchedness and decay. They are a priceless boon to him who is not content with the dry husks of history, but who seeks to realize the life of the ages that are gone. Here we can see the very houses dwelt in by the famous men of old, and in imagination we can people the desolate streets with the picturesque throngs that once surged through them, bent on war or pleasure or civil strife, in the strenuous Renaissance days. Owing to these unchanged cities, he who loves the time when Italy was queen of nations, the torch-bearer of the world, can live again in her glorious past, though that atmosphere of vitality has given place to the stifling air of the chamber where Poverty has slept so long in filth and rags. Were Assisi destitute of those treasures of art that make her so important to the student, she would still be worthy of a visit, because, like Pompeii, she makes us realize an era that has passed away. What the ashes of Vesuvius did for the city of the south, loss of liberty has done for this Umbrian town, which has slept beneath power's benumbing hand as Pompeii beneath her ashen shroud.

But Assisi is something more than one of the most interesting of mediæval and Renaissance cities. It had a century of glorious life which has made it a place of holy pilgrimage through all the ages — the century that elapsed between the beginning of

St. Francis' mission and the completion of the paintings in the church of San Francesco in its splendid monastery. That century was one of the most important in the annals of our race; and all that remains at Assisi serves to aid us in its reconstruction.

There are many of the saints like the stern St. Dominic and St. Ignatius Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits, who can appeal only to true Catholics; but wherever a human heart beats with love for our fellow-men, for the innocent creatures of the woods and fields, or even for the beauties of inanimate nature, St. Francis of Assisi has a friend. If he needed it, to him should much be forgiven, for he loved more than any human being that has ever lived; loved not only men, but birds and beasts and fishes, trees and plants, mountains, lakes and rivers, the heavens above and the sun, moon and stars. In his eyes they were all brothers; and his hymn of praise is of all human utterances the broadest in its sympathies. And this hymn was no rhetorical exercise; it burst spontaneously from an overflowing heart. That hymn, which can never be read too often, is thus beautifully translated by Matthew Arnold:

O most high, almighty, good Lord God, to Thee belong praise, glory, honour, and all blessings!

Praised be my Lord God with all His creatures; and specially our brother the sun, who brings us the day, and who brings us the light; fair is he, and shining with a very great splendor: O Lord, he signifies to us Thee!

Praised be my Lord for our sister the moon, and for the stars, the which he has set clear and lovely in heaven.

Praised be my Lord for our brother, the wind, and for air and cloud, calms and all weather, by the which thou upholdest in life all creatures.

Praised be my Lord for our sister water, who is very serviceable unto us, and humble, and precious, and clean.

Praised be my Lord for our brother fire, through whom thou givest us light in the darkness; and he is bright, and pleasant, and very mighty and strong.

Praised be my Lord for our mother the earth, the which doth sustain us and keep us, and bringeth forth divers fruits and flowers of many colours, and grass.

Praised be my Lord for all those who pardon one another for his love's sake, and who endure weakness and tribulation; blessed are they who peaceably shall endure, for Thou, O most Highest, shalt give them a crown!

This hymn marks the first faint dawn of the Renaissance. During the Middle Ages the world had been looked upon as all

evil, and its loveliness had been regarded as an allurement of the devil. Men had been taught to turn their eyes inward, and to consider this earth only a place where they were condemned to linger for a while, merely to be tempted of the Evil One. As is so vividly expressed in Carducci's powerful "Hymn to Satan," all that makes life worth living was regarded as accursed. Men must hate this world as they hated the fiend himself, and must turn from its wholesome joys as sins that imperilled their salvation.

But this mediæval conception St. Francis utterly cast off. He looked on nature as pure and holy. He rejoiced in the freshness of the morning, in the beauty of hill and vale, of the starry sky and the boundless sea, in the songs of the birds and the gambols of the harmless denizens of the forest; above all, in the splendor of the sun's uprising and the glory of his going down. It is said that the birds would come to him and that he would preach to them, and there is no reason to doubt the story; for others who loved them much have been able to attract the winged songsters.

He came in an evil time, when the enthusiasm of the crusades had died away, when the clergy had become rich and worldly, and when religion manifested itself chiefly in a selfish effort to save one's own soul by solitary prayers and penance. He loved his fellow-men so much that he forgot himself, and bent only on saving them, he left to the Lord the care of his own salvation. His was not the fierce preaching of the Dominicans which later found its highest type in the frenzied anathemas of Savonarola. He called men to repentance, but he led them by the hand of love instead of driving them by the voice of terror. To every part of Europe he and his brethren penetrated, preaching the Gospel of Love instead of the despairing dogmas that for centuries had been ringing in the ears of men; and he caused such a spiritual awakening as the world has seldom known. Too often religious fervor has only aroused animosities, and left the world sadder, darker, fuller of evil passions than it was before. But the religion that St. Francis preached was the gospel of sweetness and light, and he left the world brighter, happier and better than he found it. No wonder that in his case the customary delay

was deemed unnecessary, and that when he had been dead but two years his canonization was decreed, and the foundations laid of the glorious church that was to enshrine his memory.

And it was peculiarly appropriate that when after his death a great monastery grew up around his simple cell, Cimabue and Giotto, earliest of Renaissance painters, should be called to decorate the walls raised in honor of him whose song had marked the first faint dawning of the new light. For years they and their pupils worked in the double church, adorning it with frescoes that have made it one of the greatest shrines of painting, where almost as many go to do homage to the artist as to the saint. And how wonderfully the pictures are preserved! Nearly six hundred years old, most of them seem scarcely to have suffered at the hands of time.

Painted when art was in its earliest cradle, their archaic style is not calculated to please the ignorant; but when we have studied them until we understand them, they enchant us by their simplicity and truth and by a certain beauty which it is not given to the vulgar to perceive. And the more we study them the more we are convinced that Giotto is one of the greatest painters that ever lived. His work is crude and imperfect; but no artist, not even Leonardo, made so great an advance upon the works of his predecessors. He was one of the great creators of all time. He found the art of painting a dead carcass, mummified in the ceremonies of Byzantium, and he breathed into it the breath of life, of a healthy, robust life that was destined to be long and fruitful. And in the simplicity and directness with which he tells a story he has never been surpassed. He brings upon the scene just as many actors as are necessary to make the matter plain; he groups them with consummate skill and places them in the most appropriate attitudes. And while his pictures are primitive, there is in them nothing childish. It is always evident that he is a man — a man whose means of utterance are yet imperfect, but who has the thoughts, the feelings, the energies of mature manhood. As his commissions were all from the clergy, who were then the sole patrons of art, he tells only the Gospel story and the lives of the saints, but he tells them with none of the childishness of the Middle Ages or the mawkish sen-

timentality of the decadence. The story is told simply, but it is told as a man would tell it; and the more we see of his strong, wholesome art the better we like it.

There is a certain similarity between the arts of painting and poetry. There are painters, like Michelangelo, who have all the grandeur of the epic. There are others, like Perugino, who have the sweet, pensive sadness that charms us in the elegy. Still others, like Correggio, have the soaring, palpitating brilliancy of the lyric, and remind us of the sky-lark's song. Some, like Goya, have all the bitterness of the most envenomed satire. Others are by nature dramatic; and among these Giotto occupies a position in the foremost rank. He is one of the great dramatists. Everything in his mind takes the form of a drama that is being enacted before our eyes. He delights not in solitary dreamers. With him all is action; not mere aimless unrest, but action concurring to produce or illustrate a particular event. And his dramas are characterized by almost Greek simplicity. There are no crowds of people thrown upon the canvas to fill it up. There are no accessories to distract the eye. The actors are reduced to the fewest number that can be effective, and each contributes his part to the general impression. The landscape is the simplest, and is not designed by its beauty to distract attention from the events that are transpiring. The artist is representing some occurrence, and his only concern is to make it readily comprehensible and to impress it upon our minds. His drama has complete unity, and to secure that by the simplest and most efficient means is his constant aim.

The primary element of the drama is realism. All that transpires upon the stage must seem to be actually happening to living men and women. In other forms of poetry the imagination may bear us away into most airy regions; but the drama must remain with its feet planted firmly upon the earth. Of all literary forms it is the most wedded to the real. Therefore a great dramatic painter must be an uncompromising realist. His figures must stand out so that it looks as if they could step down from the wall.

Giotto possessed this realism in an amazing degree considering the age in which he was born. The Madonnas of the Byzantine



style and other similar pictures that he had to guide him were little better than wooden images. They had no actuality. They could never have lived, and if a miracle had endowed them with life, they could never have moved. Giotto effected the most sudden and complete revolution in all the range of painting. He looked around him. He saw the world, not as it appeared to a cloistered dreamer, but as it was in fact. When he wanted to portray the Gospel story or the lives of the saints, he studied the men and women that he knew, and transferred them to the canvas just as they were. His one guide was nature. Interest in the remains of classical antiquity had not yet awakened. On the mediæval past he turned his back. He sought his models among the actual, breathing human beings that he conversed with every day; and he expressed both their feelings and their outward forms with an intensity of realism that has rarely been surpassed. He not only gives us a drama with all the dramatic unities, everything co-operating to enhance the effect of the central event; but his drama is enacted by real men and women, not by shadowy figments of the brain. Realism is the basis of all art that is truly vital and enduring, and the tree of Renaissance art grew so fair and strong because Giotto planted its roots so deeply in the solid earth.

At Assisi, no doubt by special command, Giotto ventured on a field from which his sound common sense usually preserved him, the allegories in which the Middle Ages took such delight. In this spirit he painted his famous pictures of "Chastity," "Obedience," "Poverty" and the "Triumph of St. Francis." Doubtless their complicated symbolism was comprehensible to the people of his time, who were accustomed to such things; but now we can only look upon them as strong and pleasing compositions, where the artist has produced great work in spite of the limitations of the subjects.

And it is at Assisi that one sees Cimabue and his pupils to the best advantage. The ceiling and the higher portions of the walls of the Upper Church are said to have been adorned by them. Their pictures are sadly ruined, and they lack the vitality and the convincing realism of those of Giotto; but as mural decora-

tions they are superb, rich and mellow in tone, graceful and harmonious in design.

The whole world affords no such striking shrine of early Renaissance painting as this double church. Giotto may perhaps be seen to greater advantage at Padua and Florence; but here he and all his contemporaries labored, each striving his utmost to adorn the sanctuary of the age's favorite saint. The schools of Florence and Siena, the leaders of the Renaissance, sent their worthiest sons, who wrought together in splendid emulation. Duccio, Giotto's not unworthy rival, Simone Martini with his quaint and winning beauty, Pietro Lorenzetti with his grace and charm, worked side by side with Taddeo Gaddi, Buffalmacco, Giovanni da Milano, Giottino, Giunta Pisano and many another painter worthy of such companionship, but who must remain forever nameless. The result of their united labors is a decorative whole that has been rarely, if ever, equalled. If we knew nothing of the Gospel story or the lives of the saints which the frescoes commemorate — even if the human figure were strange to us and it was all without intelligent meaning, we should yet be charmed with the mellow richness of color and the general harmony of design. And when to this purely sensuous charm is added the deep significance of the pictures, the earnestness and conviction that spring from a faith so strong that it sees as with bodily eyes, we realize that we are in the presence of immortal works; we look upon them with ever increasing reverence, and as we look they grow in truth and power, until we are able to overleap the ages that have intervened, to forget the marvels that have since been wrought, and to see them as Dante saw them, to whom they appeared Art's final word, the *ne plus ultra* beyond which she could never go.

But not alone are the schools of Florence and Siena to be studied at Assisi — the gracious Umbrian primitives are here to be seen to advantage. In San Francesco is a Madonna and Saints by Lo Spagna; in the cathedral, one by Nicolo da Foligno; in San Damiano an Annunciation and St. Francis receiving the Stigmata by Eusebio di San Giorgio; while in the Capella dei Pellegrini, Pier Antonio Mezzatri gives us his most charming work.

Nor is St. Francis the only great name that Assisi has contributed to the world. Here, in the far days when this was Umbrian Asisium, with marble porticoes like that before the Temple of Minerva whose faultless columns still attest the wealth and taste of the inhabitants, Propertius, foremost of Roman elegiac poets, had his birth, and amid these delightful scenes he acquired that love of natural beauty that characterized his poems. He, too, loved much; not with the holy love of St. Francis, but with a consuming passion for the fair and faithless Cynthia, and he has enshrined the memory of the Roman courtesan in verse that can never die — verse gorgeous in its imagery, but sometimes filled with feelings too intense and vehement for coherent utterance. Like St. Francis, he is possessed by an overmastering spirit, but it is the spirit of Pan and his attendant nymphs, not that of the Man of Galilee.

And Assisi claims to have given birth to another poet of equal fame, the gentle Metastasio, now too much neglected. Rome also claims him; but at Assisi they show the house where he was born, and this should carry conviction to the most incredulous. At any rate, his father was an Assisan, and if the poet was born elsewhere, it was not his fault.

In his own day Metastasio was the most widely read of all dramatic authors. He could sit in his library and count forty editions of his works, not merely in Italian, but in French, German, Spanish, English and Modern Greek. His dramas were set to music by all the leading composers of his day, many of them a number of times by different hands. Now he has fallen into a neglect that is at least as undeserved as his contemporary adulation. He is one of the great masters of the Italian language. In his hands it flows onward as clear as a silver brook and with as sweet a music. The songs with which he intersperses his plays have all the simplicity and the charm of those that Goldsmith inserted in the "Vicar of Wakefield," with a haunting melody that we cannot forget.

Talleyrand said that no one who had not lived before the French Revolution could have any idea of the pleasures of life; but as Watteau gives us some notion of the coquettish grace and the blithe wantonness of that age, Metastasio reveals to us its

loftier aspects, its exquisite courtesy, its high ideals of the perfect gentleman and lady. The people whom he puts upon the stage bear the same relation to the men and women whose names are bestowed upon them that the actors of the day in their silk stockings, laces and perruques bore to the real personages of history; but their sentiments are always elevated and refined, and they carry themselves with a delicacy, a grace and dignity bred only of centuries of gentility. We still delight in the dainty warriors of Perugino in the *Cambio* of Perugia that pose as Leonidas, Scipio, Pericles, Cincinnatus and the like. They are the perfect embodiment of the heroes of Metastasio, who should afford us the same pleasure, and whose example was never more needed than in this age when the spirit of democracy is dragging us all down to the same level, and teaching men to neglect the graces and refinements of life.

Like a true Umbrian, his only theme is love — not the celestial love of St. Francis, not the love of the senses that Propertius sings, but the romantic love that was the outgrowth of the Middle Ages, and which had been polished and refined in the courts of princes until it had become a thing of rarest elegance. This love he brings always upon the stage, displaying every aspect of its charming delicacy, its exquisite sentiment, its noble spirit of devotion, its infinite capacity for self-sacrifice. The pictures that he presents are delightful, and we are distinctly poorer for their loss now that they have yielded to a cruder realism.

But if St. Francis, Propertius and Metastasio had never lived, if Assisi's ancient churches and its still more ancient temple of Minerva with its lovely columns were level with the dust, if the city itself with its precipitous narrow streets and its old stone houses, clinging to the mountain side like a gigantic wasp's nest, were blotted out, it would still richly repay the traveller to climb up hither for the view alone; for earth holds no lovelier prospect than this Umbrian land. It is a region of broad and richly cultivated valleys between hills whose contours are curves of perfect grace. I know of no land that gives one such a sense of space. The valleys are so wide that the far off hills are blue in the distance, and the hills are not high enough nor close enough together to cut off the view, so that you see mountains

rising beyond them, and between them vales that seem to stretch away into infinity. And upon all the enchanted prospect there breathes a spirit of celestial peace. As we look over these smiling valleys and verdant hilltops, we cannot believe that the clash of contending armies ever disturbed the heavenly serenity of the scene. To find anything like it, we have to go to those pictures of Claude Lorraine, where the ideal landscape is bathed in a peace that surpasses language; and here, as in Claude's pictures, the high Appenines that bound the distant horizon lend to the view a sublimity which alone is needed to make the vista perfect. It is not surprising that the painters who grew up in this wonderful land, particularly Raphael, excelled all others in the sense of space and in the depicting of serene loveliness. Every time that their eye ranged over the magic prospect they received an unequalled lesson in grace, in beauty, in serenity. No wonder that their art is a revelation of peaceful beauty; no wonder that they avoided scenes of violence and distress. They were brought up in Saturn's happy realm, where the very air breathed of rest and joy. From their mountain tops they looked out on vales teeming with fertility, where the vines, festooned from tree to tree, bent low beneath the weight of their luscious clusters, and the immense white oxen, unequalled for size and grace, drew the deep plough through the rich soil without an effort; where nature repaid the toil of the husbandman a hundred fold, and the song of the reaper was sweet upon the air; while the far-off mountains spoke to them of the battlements of heaven upon whose sunset clouds angels seemed to float and sing.

But alas! man's fierce spirit, save in rare and artistic bosoms, is but little sensible to nature's benignant influence; and this land, which breathes of heavenly peace, has been the abode of war and strife from the earliest dawn of recorded history. The very position of the cities, all of them perched high upon mountains whence they could watch their enemies approaching from afar, and hurl them down the steep declivity when they mounted to the assault, speaks of the people's dread of one another. Yonder, across the valley, like an eagle watching upon its eyrie, ready to swoop down at any moment upon the fruitful plain, is proud Perugia, Assisi's relentless foe. Since the dawn of his-

tory they have glared at one another, and the lion of Assisi has ever gone down before the Perugian griffin.

In the earliest times all this lovely land belonged to the Umbrians; but at a day too remote to be definitely fixed the Etruscans, that strange race whose language still defies the savants who have compelled the temples of Rhameses and the palaces of Sennacherib to give up their secrets, came from a region which we cannot even guess, and filled all the land with war and blood. Slowly the Umbrians retired till behind the Tiber they made their last stand here at Assisi; while the Etruscans established their furthest outpost in Perugia on yonder hill. In the Tiber's rich vale that lay between, their hostile forces met from age to age, till Rome burst suddenly through the Cimminian forest, and subjugated both. Then for long centuries the *sacra pax Romana* remained unbroken save by an occasional civil tumult, and this land found beneath the eagles a peace that was worthy of its beauty. But Rome fell, and then Assisi knew no peace until it sank beneath the papal despotism. The barbarian Totila and the Christian Charlemagne destroyed it utterly. More than once it was conquered by Perugia, its ramparts levelled, and its people carried off or slain. But it ever rose from its ashes, fierce and defiant, and when Perugia vouchsafed it a period of repose, its lawless nobles barricaded the streets, assaulted one another's palaces, or lured each other to friendly banquets, only to cut the throats of the unsuspecting guests. At length, worn out by tumult and murder, she bowed the neck to the Roman crozier as once she had bowed it to the Roman eagles.

Reduced to the condition of a neglected provincial town, with no power of initiative, no control over her destinies, Assisi's fiery energies gave way to the lethargy of death. What we see now is but the petrification of her past. As she was when the shackles were put upon her hands, so is she to-day. No new stone has been added to her houses; no change has come over her save that commerce has forsaken her portals, and Time has laid his heavy hand, though gently, upon her crumbling battlements.

Now the strife and the subjugation are but a hideous dream, and for Assisi, as for all of Italy, a brighter day is breaking.

In the lovely valley at our feet each man sits beneath his vine and fig-tree, singing the songs of peace to all his neighbors. No clanging of weapons or bray of trumpets disturbs the truly celestial calm, and as we watch from Assisi's ramparts no sound comes to our ears harsher than the distant song of peasants returning from the fields or the great white cattle lowing as they think of their master's crib; while the setting sun fills all the west with gold-dust, and throws around Perugia's towers, which no longer threaten, a purple halo of celestial glory. As we look round us upon the matchless prospect it seems as if the reign of Saturn had returned again, and that war and hate had fled before the white-winged doves of peace.

G. B. ROSE.

Little Rock, Arkansas.